

The Spirituality of Eating

Kabbalah teaches that eating is also spiritual.

By Yaakov-Shmuel Levinson [excerpted from B'Or Hatorah magazine]



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Introduction - A disclaimer

I am writing as a nutritionist viewing the spiritual aspects of eating and not as a Torah authority. All statements regarding the spiritual aspects of eating are included with sources to emphasize my role as a “collector” and not as an original author or authority in the field. My intention is to reveal to the reader spiritual aspects of eating against a biological background.

Why Do We Eat?

When asked why they eat, people usually respond, “I eat when I’m hungry,” “I eat when something looks or smells good,” or “I eat when it’s time for the next meal.” For many, the routine of eating is an agony to minimize or avoid by skipping breakfast or using instant powders or fast foods. Others snack through the day without ever sitting down to a meal! In this paper we shall examine what really happens when we eat - from both spiritual and physical points of view.

In the Beginning

To achieve historical perspective we must go back in time to the beginning, to the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge.

The woman saw that the tree was good for food and desirable to the eyes, and the tree was attractive as a means to gain intelligence. She took some of its fruit and ate, and also gave some to her husband, and he ate. (Gen. 3:6)

The trees were real trees, the fruits were real fruits, and the eating was actual eating, but the fruits were fine and the eating was delicate. As the Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim of Luzzatto) explains in *Da’at T’vunot*, the eating from the Tree of Knowledge introduced desire for all material, bodily pleasures and for all sins.

In the beginning, good and evil had been separate, both in the fruit and in the entire world. But when the sin

of the Tree of Knowledge corrupted the world, good became mixed with evil. Sparks of holiness fell into their husks, and the pure combined with the impure. Man was sentenced to work hard for his food and to die. The world became more coarse.

Eat with Caution

In *Tanna D'vay Eliyahu*, Elijah the Prophet is claimed to acrimoniously blame all our troubles on eating:

...Elijah the Prophet is claimed to acrimoniously blame all our troubles on eating.

I call Heaven and Earth to bear witness that all the children of man are gathered to death and all creatures descend to sorrow only because of eating and drinking. (*Eliyahu Zuta* 3)

The commentary *Zikukin D'Nura* explains that all sins result from overindulging in food and drink. We learn in the Torah that satiation leads to forgetting or even rejecting G-d, i.e.:

You may eat and be satisfied...But your heart might grow haughty, and you might forget your G-d, Who brought you out of Egypt, the house of slavery. (Deut. 8:12-14)

For this reason we are commanded not to eat on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement for our sins, since improper eating has the power to turn our souls to wrongdoing. (Rabbenu Bachya, *Shuchan shel Arba*)

Hunger and Appetite Mechanisms

Hunger is defined as an uneasy sensation caused by want of food. Appetite is the complex of sensations by which an organism is aware of its desire for food. The physical basis of hunger is regulated by the “feeding center” in the hypothalamic portion of the brain.

The appetite-regulating mechanism in a normal human being adjusts food intake to the point where caloric intake balances the output of energy. This maintains body weight.

Thirst, the desire to drink, is regulated by the hypothalamic osmoreceptors of the brain. A dry sensation in the mouth also motivates a person to drink.

The physical basis of hunger and thirst has been well proven. However, the psychological motivating factors are often the overriding influence driving one to eat or drink too much. Most habitual eating is unrelated to hunger. It is more related to one's surroundings, including the present of reminders of food, or to one's emotional state. In short, we often eat for many reasons besides that of satisfying our physical need for food!

Components of Food

It is clear that the soul is not nourished by physical bread as the body is. The food we eat is actually a combination of both a physical and a spiritual entity. The body is nourished by the physical aspects, or nutrients, contained in the foods we eat; the soul is nourished by the spiritual power, or sparks of holiness, which enliven the physical substance of all matter, including food. Therefore, body and soul are united in the act of eating. (*Ruach Chaim on Pirkey Avot*, chapter 3, mishna 3; *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 6:1, and see *Magen Avraham* on verse 4 there)

We have seen that all of Creation is composed of a mixture of good and evil. Likewise, in every food that a person eats there is a combination of good and evil. Food physically consists of good counterparts, i.e. nutrients, and bad aspects, i.e. waste or indigestible matter. Likewise, spiritually, food contains sparks of holiness, or good components, and husks, or kelipot, which are the gross, bad components that encompass the sparks.

Physical Origins: The Nutrients

Where does food come from? Plants grow by effectively combining sunlight, water, and soil. Animals feed on plant and/or animals. Humans obtain their food from mineral, vegetable, and animal sources.

Our food contains 40-45 substances known as nutrients, which we must consume in adequate amounts in order to grow and lead a healthy life. These nutrients enter our bodies from the food we eat and are converted into thousands of substances necessary for life.

Nutrients are divided into six general classes: Carbohydrates, Fats, Proteins, Vitamins, Minerals, Water

Spiritual Origins: The Sparks

Before descending into the body, the soul is nourished as the angels are - directly through the radiance of the Shechina (the Divine Presence). Separated by the body from its former supernal nourishment, the soul now is nourished by physical food (which is the manifestation of that Divine nourishment). Thus, when one eats, one benefits somewhat from the radiance of the Shechina. (*Reishit Chochma, Sha'ar Ha'Kedusha* 15:51; *Siddur T'fila L'Moshe*, edited by the Ramak [see his commentary on "Elokai Neshama"].)

Only in the future world...will food become recognizable as radiance of the Divine Presence.

The soul, clothed in the physical garment of the flesh, is now nourished indirectly by G-d through food. Such is G-d's Will, that we should exist with our physical limitations, and that we should require physical food to sustain our vital forces. Only in the future world, when stripped of its physical garment, will food become recognizable as radiance of the Divine Presence. However, in this world it appears clothed in its physical

garment. (*Pri Tsadik, "Et Ha'Ochel"*)

Food, then, comes into the world from the supernal table of Heaven. (*Reishit Chochma, Sha'ar Ha'Kedusha* 15:46)

...the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge caused good to become mixed with evil throughout the world and sparks of holiness to fall amidst the husks. These sparks of holiness are scattered throughout Creation and are contained in varying amounts in the food we eat. These sparks of holiness give plants the strength to emerge and grow from the soil as they are watered by the rains. (*Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avoda, sha'ar 7*)

COMBINATION OF GOOD AND EVIL IN OUR FOODS

	Spiritual Aspects (Soul)	Physical Aspects (Body)
GOOD	Sparks	Nutrients
EVIL	Husks	Waste

Digestion of Food

Food is first introduced into the mouth, where it is chewed by the teeth in order to break up large food particles and to mix it with saliva, thus beginning the process known as digestion. The food is then propelled into the esophagus by the tongue with the aid of the swallowing mechanism. The food travels down the esophagus until it reaches the stomach. Food is stored in the stomach, mixed with acid and other digestive juices, and released at a controlled, steady rate into the entrance of the small intestine, where it is digested further and absorbed in the small intestine, the intestinal contents are mixed with pancreatic juice, bile and other secretions.

The derivation of energy from a physical source is the most spiritual of our bodily processes.

The intestinal contents continue down the long, winding tube of the small intestine until they pass into the thick tube of the large intestine, the main function of which is to absorb water, salt and other minerals, and certain vitamins. Stool containing inorganic (non-carbon containing) material, undigested plant fibers, bacteria, and water are excreted from the body through the rectum.

Absorption of Food

Although limited amounts of water, alcohol, simple salts, and glucose are absorbed through the stomach wall, the small intestine is by far the most important organ for absorption. Absorption into the small intestine consists primarily of the transfer of nutrients from the lumen of the small intestine through the cells lining the intestinal wall into the wall of the intestine (the lamina propria). From there the nutrients enter the blood and lymph vessels. The nutrients are then carried to all parts of the body through the bloodstream. The waste materials are eliminated from the body via stool, urine, sweat, and expired air. The small intestine, then, is the main site of selection of the nutrients for use in the body, leaving the waste for eventual elimination.

Use of the Nutrients

The end products of the digestive processes discussed are amino acids of proteins, fat derivatives, and simple carbohydrates. These compounds are absorbed and metabolized in the body by various routes. The intricate details of their metabolism are studied by biochemists.

How do we get energy from the food we eat? The derivation of energy from a physical source is the most spiritual of our bodily processes. To function properly the body must be constantly supplied with fuel or energy, supplied by either digesting food or drawing on its fat stores when adequate food is not available. The chemical energy which derives from this as well as all life processes is held in the high-energy bonds of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), found in all forms of life.

Plants derive ATP from light energy when they produce and store excess carbohydrates, mostly as starch. Through the food chain, the stored energy of plants becomes the potential energy of animals and man. Animals and man, in turn, through their metabolic processes convert stored plant energy into a usable form of ATP to sustain their life processes. Most of the energy consumed as food is used up as heat, released either directly in the body's metabolic reactions or as a by-product of work performed by the body. Only that part of food energy which is captured in chemical form in the high-energy bonds of ATP can support these functions.

The Spiritual Act of Eating: Purification of the Sparks

...man does not live by bread alone, but by all that comes out of G-d's mouth. (Deut. 8:3)

The separation of nutrients from waste in the act of eating has its spiritual counterpart in the purification of the sparks of holiness which are contained in food. And is not the physical and spiritual separation of good from evil the very meaning of human existence?

When a person eats properly, with the right intention, the sparks of holiness from his food attach to his soul, and the waste is forced away. (*Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avoda, sha'ar 7*, chapter 2)

If we really can separate good from evil by eating correctly, then this purification has great ramifications...

The Effects of Eating

Eating is one of our most common activities. It must be G-d's Will that we are so involved in eating. There must be an important spiritual purpose to it. If we really can separate good from evil by eating correctly, then this purification has great ramifications upon all levels of reality.

G-d made this world one of choice and free will so that we should choose good and abhor evil. Therefore sparks of holiness fell into this world, and good and evil were mixed. Man's main service to G-d is to purify the dispersed sparks of his soul and to raise them up to the level from which the soul has been quarried. (*Mor V'Shemesh on parashat Pinchas*)

Moreover, even one's special craving for or aversion to a particular food can be seen as a special sign that G-d has brought him food that needs rectification. (*Shulchan Ha'Tahor*, "The Essence of Eating," Chapter 6) ...when one eats, the holy sparks [of the food] cleave to his soul. By blessing with the right intention before eating and by eating for the sake of Heaven, righteous people purify and raise up the sparks of holiness contained in the food they eat. When a person learns Torah, prays to G-d, or uses the strength obtained from food to perform a Commandment, he elevates the sparks of holiness to the sanctified worlds of Heaven, whence they had originally fallen. The sparks of holiness are thereby returned to their source. (*Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avoda, sha'ar 7*, chapters 1-2)

Releasing Sparks and Raising up Souls

The fallen sparks, or souls, return and ascend through the four foundations of inorganic matter, plant matter, animal matter, and human matter. They are raised up from an inorganic to an organic level when plants grow up from the soil, watered by the rain..They are raised up further when the plants they are contained in are eaten by animals or humans; and likewise animals are elevated when eaten by humans with proper intention. (*Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avoda, sha'ar 7*, chapter 1)

The table upon which we eat is now our sacrificial altar; our food is our sacrifice...

Atonement of Sins - Holiness

Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi R Elazar said, "As long as the Temple stood, the sacrificial altar atoned for Israel; now a man's table atones for him." (Talmud Brachot 55a)

The table upon which we eat is now our sacrificial altar; our food is our sacrifice; and while eating, we offer the sacrifice in place of the Temple priest. (Kol Menachem)

During the times of our Temple in Jerusalem, the chief effect of sacrificing was the elevation and purification of the sparks of holiness contained in the sacrifices. Now that we no longer have the Temple service, our prayers and our eating must serve this function. (*Yesod V'Shoresh Ha'Avoda, sha'ar 7*, chapter 1)

Our eating for this elevated purpose - for the sake of Heaven - can bring us to holiness and cleaving to G-d. (*Reishit Chochma, Sha'ar Ha'Kedusha* 3)

Blessing of Rain

The purification of the sparks is dependent on rain, and therefore there is no punishment in the Torah greater than drought. Likewise, there is no reward greater than the blessing of rain in its season since the coming of the Messiah is dependent on rain. (*Shulchan Ha'Tahor*, "The Essence of Eating," chapter 5)

And it will come to pass, if you diligently obey My Commandments which I command you this day, to love the L-rd your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give rain for your land at the due time, the early rain and the late rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will give you grass in your fields for your cattle, so that you can eat and be satisfied. (Deut. 11:13-15)

The rain falls from above and helps the earth send forth vegetation. Animals feed on the plants and other animals; and by serving G-d, man raises mineral, vegetable, and animal matter up to its source. When all the sparks of holiness are raised and returned to their source in Heaven, then the Messiah will come, we believe soon in our days.

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